MRS FISHER
OR
THE FUTURE OF HUMOUR

ROBERT GRAVES

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TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

For a full list of this Series see the end of the Book.

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THE FUTURE OF HUMOUR

BY

ROBERT GRAVES

Author of "Lars Porsena, or The Future of Swearing", etc.

"*Vos estis, vos estis,* that is to saye, you be, you be. And what be you?" sayd Skelton. "I saye that you bee a sorte of knaves, yea, and a man might say worse than knaves; and why I shall show you."

Merrie Tales of Skelton, Tale VII.

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MRS FISHER

OR, THE FUTURE OF HUMOUR

There are few even of the less obvious problems in the encyclopedia of prediction that have not been confidently settled in the last few months by someone or other in one way or the other. Yet the most important problem of all, the master-problem conditioning all the rest, has been everywhere avoided. The futures of Xylography, of Yiddish, of the Zebra : these are suggestive and even exciting titles. But the gap shows only the more plainly with each new prediction. Like the hundred-yard gap that once appeared menacingly in the Roman Forum —and the soothsayers said that someone must piously leap in and close it—and

one Mettus Curtius, a Roman Knight, leaped in with horse and armour and the earth closed above him and he was never heard of again. Hell and farewell.

Why I am playing Mettus is that I really don't care any more than Mettus did whether I am heard of again. Other writers do. That is why they hold back and pretend that the gap is not there, and temporize with Nuto, the future of Nutting; Nitor, of Knitting; Netora, of Netting; Notorius, of Knotting; and Nugae Bugae of Noughts and Crosses. The difficulty about the *Future of Humour* is, of course, that if the writer does his job conscientiously his examples of the humour of the future will be consistently not-yet-funny and therefore altogether unplausible; so he will forfeit his claim to a sense of humour in the present. If, on the other hand, he remains a humorist of the present his

readers will complain that he has not conscientiously revealed the future. When Mettus Curtius leaped into the gap he at once became a type of tragic courage. He was not even given the alternative of trying to leap across it (though certainly if one is in sufficient haste and desperation it is possible to cross any chasm in safety, simply by assuming, with all the humourlessness of faith, a bridge that is not there). The gap had to be filled. He remains a type of tragic courage—and tragedy is too single-minded for humour—or of "unconscious humour", which is, if anything, less intrinsically humorous than faith. The joke is always on Mettus, but that does not matter to Mettus, since it is his own joke and he put it there for reasons of his own.

Here at least are two paragraphs wasted in so-called brilliant and provocative writing. Now let me go on slowly,

and contradict myself generously, and be altogether unsystematic, for humour's sake, and be dull, for your own sakes. For if you cannot at some point of the book pause and find it dull, you will think yourselves dull. And it is your sense of humour that is on trial, not mine. I have publicly thrown mine into the gap. In this context I will record that the happiest half-hour of my life was once when put by accident for some weeks in the company of thirty or forty men whom I detested and who detested me, I decided finally to entertain them, from the Saturday-night stage. There were two possible results. Either I might really have amused them so extremely that our mutual detestation would have made a beautiful moment of it for us all, or I might have bored them extremely, and the joy of boring people whom one detests under pretence of amusing them

is more beautiful still because entirely one's own. I succeeded in boring them, though honourably (for humour's sake) trying to amuse them. And they tried to conceal their boredom and detestation, as gentlemen, by a little perfunctory clapping. So I sang one more song, pretending to be flattered, and they rewarded me by not clapping that one at all.

The future of humour is not to be discussed in the sort of way that one discusses the future of medical research or mechanical invention. Humour, it must be said at once, is first of all a personal matter, losing its virtue by diffusion. One cannot make predictions about personal matters, only about diffusion. Humour in diffusion concerns ideas in diffusion and people and things in diffusion. It is type-humour; about Scotsmen, and Fishermen, and Marriage,

and Widows, and Worms. It is only funny occasionally when all its comic ingredients are gathered up in a compact tansy-cake as a missile against itself. As, for instance, in the story, "There once was a Scottish fisherman who married a widow with worms." Type humour will continue with this civilization to confirm changes of fashion in dress and dancing and politics, and new discoveries and inventions. But jokes about steam-engines in 1840 and telephones in 1870 and motor-cars in 1900 and broadcasting in 1920 have been of exactly the same stupid brightness as jokes about teledromy are going to be in 2040 and about pyrobatics in 2070 and about the alarming moechomechanistic series of 2090. These jokes of the future will be less crudely mechanical in form as the new discoveries tend to be less crudely mechanical, but they will not be intrinsically more

humorous. They will still be tagged on to Scotsmen, and fishermen, and marriage, and widows, and worms, and they will merely confirm the popular acceptance of scientific facts resembling in spurious novelty all previous scientific facts; which is not the future of humour except in a mere time-sense.

Much of the future of humour is in the past. For instance, Blake's *Island in the Moon*. It is still personal, not diffused humour, and the out-of-dating of its topical references makes it still more of the future. Blake's biographers apologize for it on the ground that genius is irritable and the age was coarse. I doubt whether even in a hundred years' time its humour will be diffused. Why should it be, though Blake-worship continues as strong as ever? Think of London a hundred years' hence and ask yourself whether what Miss Gittipin

sang will appear anything out of the ordinary. There is every reason to believe that in 2028 the lodging-houses and private hotels of Kensington and Bloomsbury will still be standing and their furniture inside them, and that there will still be periodic revivals of roller-skating at Holland Park, and Salvation Army meetings every Sunday at Hyde Park Corner, and ape-teaparties in the Experimental House at the Zoological Gardens, and the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company still touring the suburbs, and the *Countryman's Diary* still running in the *Daily Mail*, and the centenaries of famous musicians coming round again for celebration, and the yearly Stock Exchange Sweep, and the Roman Emperors in a row to the left as you enter the British Museum, and St Thomas' Hospital collecting tin-foil, and Johnny Walker still going strong, and another twenty

volumes being added to *The Library of Great Detective Stories*. Set *those* against your teledromy and your pyrobatics and your most alluring moecho-mechanisms! There's a future for you! I am getting depressed already. Exactly how depressed I am I shall show by giving a few random and entirely jokeless cuttings from the daily press of 2028:

MYSTERIES OF THE BRAIN

Sir,—Referring to the letter, "Mysteries of the Brain," I had a remarkable and, I think, beautiful experience.

Some lines of Browning flitted through my mind, and I could not recollect which of his poems they were in. It was a Sunday afternoon and I lay down for a rest.

Then in a dream a scroll was unrolled and in gold letters—perpendicularly,

not horizontally as would one expect—was spelt out letter by letter the word "Paracilsus". Twice I have had astronomical problems made clear to me in this way.

F. L. H. (Budleigh Salterton).

* * *

Abbey Enlargements

It is likely, I hear, that any proposed additions to existing structures at Westminster Abbey will be submitted for the public's opinion by contemporary canvas and plaster full-size erections *in situ*, with painted scenic effects, so that a precise view may be obtained of what the scheme implies.

The idea is good. Technical designs and plans convey very little to the uninitiated, and photographs are frequently misleading.

* * *

YOU HAVE SEEN *ROSE MARIE* IN LONDON AND NEW YORK. SEE IT AGAIN IN PARIS AT THE THEATRE MOGADOR.
(Adv.)

* * *

What Constable Found

P.c. Double, in evidence, stated that at the scene of the accident he found a badly damaged Buick motor-car and also a motor-cycle and a woman's bicycle. Later he went to Pampisford and interviewed prisoner's wife and rosinore, who made a vountary statement. When charged at the police-station he said, "It is absurd."

The magistrates remanded prisoner on 200 bail.

* * *

Financial Note

The discerning investor will be aware that Victory Bonds have this out-

standing advantage over other Government issues, that they are accepted at face-value in payment of death-duties.

* * *

Black Wedding Rings

To the Editor

Sir,—I should like to support the suggestion of your correspondent that black rings should be worn as a sign of widowhood.

Would it not be desirable, for many reasons, that some permanent and easily visible mark of status should be worn, and if necessary made compulsory, in the case of every man and woman?

(Mrs) Harriet E. Trimble.

* * *

Pith Bath Death Myth

No further development reported to-day.

THE FUTURE OF HUMOUR

From the Parliamentary Correspondent

House of Commons, Wednesday.

The Solicitor-General moved the adoption of the new book in a speech which showed great industry of research and was prolific in detail, but lacked emotion.

Cheers and counter-cheers, pregnant with feeling, greeted his points. His appeal was to the intellect rather than to passion, but members listened with rapt attention. He said of Reservation that it had been technically illegal but not doctrinally wrong.

Padres who had never previously done so made reservation during the recent War. The elements were consecrated in battery or battalion headquarters and carried under the padres' gas-helmets and administered in the

front line to men who were in greater peril than any in hospital.

Were those padres going to give up a practice which had such sacred associations for them ?

* * *

Man With 14 Sons

A man at Willesden Police Court to-day.—I have 14 children alive, all boys.

The magistrate.—You are a credit to your King and Country.

* * *

Fashion Note

Among next year's fashionable shades for women's silk stockings will be the following :—Sombrero, Banana, Rose Nude, Blossom, Flesh, Nude, Peach, Evenglow, French Nude, Blush, Sunburn, Mirage, Champagne, Suntan,

Woodland Rose, Irish Mauve, Pigeon Breast, Gazelle, Rose Mauve, Oak, Gun Metal. Also Black and White.

* * *

Ex-Lesbian Patriarch Fined

Fines amounting to £12 were inflicted by the Isle of Wight bench yesterday in the case of Johann Michelopoulos, 55, an enemy alien, described as a former Patriarch of the Island of Lesbos, who was convicted both of failing to notify the Police of his change of residence and of keeping a male servant, namely, a gardener, without a licence. [Lesbos is a famous island in the Ægean Sea remembered as the home of tne poetess Sappho. Its present population is 3,500.]

* * *

Humour in that sort of future will be much more carefully organized than it is now. It will be protected under the revived Safeguarding of Industries Act as a key-industry employing so many hundreds and thousands of workers. There will be no more haphazard joke-making or joke-stealing. As soon as anyone thinks of a good one, he or she will immediately apply to the Board of Humour (organized on B.B.C. lines) for a copyright certificate. If not already recorded, the joke, however unpromising, will be registered and a stamped certificate issued, on payment of sevenpence. If the joke is then officially graded as "popular jest, topical, subheads A, C or D", it will be claimable by the Board for circulation in the *Daily Humorous Gazette*, on payment to the author of a sum not exceeding five shillings. If graded in any other way, the joke will

remain the property of the author, who will be permitted to print it commercially. But no jokes will be publishable without a certificate, duly stamped, nor utterable, except at the Board of Humour, until published. Family jokes of a personal kind will be excepted from this ban. "Controversial" or indecent jokes will not be subject to registration, but will not be publishable.

The Board will employ an enormous staff for sorting and refining new material and putting it into official form for registration. It will probably be found convenient to catalogue the national output not by an alphabetical system but rather by "degrees of humour". These degrees will be systematized by extended use of the cinema laugh-recording apparatus (already used in California for gauging the value of comedies); jokes of different characters

will be tested on standing audiences consisting of Board officials graded according to the keenness of their senses of humour. On the whole the Board of Humour will be popular though there will always be a certain dissatisfaction among the junior officials of the Board itself that the sense of humour is determined entirely by seniority and not by routine efficiency and general merit.

A famous Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford used to say that there were forty-three recognizable degrees of humour. He began with (1) laughter at deformities, (2) the rapidly drawn-away chair, (3) cheese, (4) mothers-in-law, (5) people without a sense of humour; and so on up to the forty-third degree which was "God". To a man with a complete sense of humour that was the purest joke of the lot. Here, I think, the professor was wrong: to laugh at God

after passing degree 42 (which, if I remember, was "Shakespeare") is to make a bad throw at the finish of the snakes-and-ladders game and so slide back to degree 5. For God has no sense of humour and that's all the humour there is to the matter. The Greek Gods were a different case; they could at least laugh at deformities. They shook with unquenchable laughter when they saw the crippled Hephæstus hobbling across the floors of Olympus. It was merry in the Hall when beards wagged all. But Jehovah did not even join with the children in laughing at the good bald prophet, and the one reasonable slap-stick joke in the New Testament, "the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea and was choked," is, Higher Criticism agrees, entirely unintentional. Perhaps by God the Professor meant the philosophical Tory God

preached from Cathedral pulpits and University chairs of Ethics : that certainly is a joke in a higher degree than Babylonian Jehovah. And the newly discovered evolutionary Liberal God is a joke beyond that because he is not quite so gentlemanly.

There are, obviously, type-jokes funnier than the most up-to-date sociological interpretation of God ; but the 2028 Board of Humour will certainly reject them as controversial. For instance, " The French " is much funnier ; honestly, I think it is much funnier. It is at least far less diffused than " Shakespeare ". For every ten wags who parody Shakespeare there is hardly one who will not take the French dead seriously. There is no question here of degree 5 (I would very carefully not reduce the joke to that). The case is something like this : suppose that the intelligence of the French

can be denoted by the algebraic sign θ, then their humour [1] can be denoted by the same algebraic sign θ and not by the sign $-\theta$, or θ^2. Nor, of course, because they eat frogs and snails and gesticulate, nor even because they do not really eat frogs and snails or gesticulate; nor even because after all they do in fact eat frogs and snails and gesticulate, but because, as Swift (I think) first discovered in surprise, "Even the little children in France speak French!" And are French. If one has to elaborate the joke any further than that even merely by saying, "Spend a week-end in Paris and see," it is no joke. For the joke is just "The French". People with uncomfortably symmetrical minds or nervous people afraid of being accused of limited humour might suggest that

[1] Tous, tous, sauf François Rabelais,
Et lui, il n'était que français.

there is a correspondingly rich joke, "Les Anglais." This is not so. Though we English do say Goddam and eat roast beef and have prominent teeth like the Montmartre stage-Englishman, or though we don't really, or though after all we do, there is no high spiritual joke "Les Anglais". "Les Anglais" is only a French mistranslation of a stale and pointless joke, "The English," made by the same wags who make a living by parodying Shakespeare; whose intelligence is θ–x and whose humour is θ–x and who therefore wish the aggregate national intelligence and the aggregate national humour to be θ like the French. The joke is, in fact, on the French again.

Beyond "The French" in the ideal academic scale (for, as I say, practical academic humour will stumble over "The French") will be found further degrees. For instance, Absolute Nothing, People,

the Caterpillar on the leaf that reminded Blake of his Mother's grief, Literature, Value, and other concepts including "Degree" and "Concept". Possibly, but here I am on difficult ground, the ultimate degree is Humour itself. I will say simply that I do not know. And slide back easily to the comfortable past of humour.

"Why can a tramp never starve in the desert?"

"Because of the sandwiches there."

"How did the sandwiches get there?"

"Ham and his descendants bread and mustard there."

"Is that all, grandfather? Is that all, grandfather?"

"No, no, darling, Lot's wife turned to a pillar of salt and all the family butter disappeared into the wilderness."

Pooh! And, can you tell me Why the hypocrite's eye, can better descry,

than you or I, upon how many toes, the pussy cat goes? Ah, The Man of Deceit, can best counterfeit, and so I suppose, can best count her toes."

Arrange those under glass-cases among the peacocks' feathers and blue Bristol glass and early Picassos and the products of the Omega work-shop and other antiques. And, at a gathering of first-class passengers only, inquire through a megaphone: "How does a traveller who is going to the East, but who dreads the Bay of Biscay and *mal-de-mer* yet does not know how to avoid them, resemble a first-class passenger going west with his wife on a Cunard liner, who cannot understand why his mother-in-law has insisted on accompanying them?" And then wait for the gigglingly lisped answer: "Because he doesn't know via Marseilles." And again, "Why is an old-fashioned chimney like a

swallow?" "Because it has a crooked flue." Correct. Please understand that I am offering you a bright suggestion, free. Start the vogue, and for a season at least return the future of humour to the early Crinoline age and capitalize it in a Jest Book, signed, *Beautiful Jokes by Beautiful People!* For *Vos estis*. You be.

To show how little I care for you all and your jealously cultivated senses of humour, I will write out the story of Toltoë.

Toltoë was a Greek maiden, daughter of Cleombrotos of Samos and married to a king of the Royal Scythians, Bodonus by name. Now the Royal Scythians count it a disgrace to wash themselves with water. When therefore some of the maidens of the Scythians observed Toltoë how she washed herself in the Greek manner by the riverside, they reported the matter to the King. The King sent his honourable ladies to inquire

of Toltoë why she washed with water and did not use Scythian plasters.

Toltoë replied: "My mother and father were both trick-divers and I was begotten six fathoms under the water."

The honourable ladies took back this answer to King Bodonus, who heard it but sent them again to Toltoë to ask why her parents had done this thing.

Toltoë replied: "For honour to Neptune."

This answer did not fully satisfy Bodonus, either, who sent to inquire why they honoured Neptune thus.

Toltoë answered the third time that it was because they were Samians and islanders, thinking to end the questioning. But Bodonus was still unsatisfied. . . .

As not one of you guessed, it is an imitation of *The* Mr Wyndham Lewis jealously trying to satirize Mr D. B. Wyndham Lewis writing a humorous

satire on Herodotus on the middle page of the *Daily Mail* for the benefit of readers who have never read Herodotus but are insured against accidents in the home—and making it a little too like Herodotus. I have therefore been forced to let it be dull. That is bucolic humour: meaning not-funny to the power of not-funny. It is a regrettable aspect of the real future of humour. Had I been less strict I would have ended with:

> ". . . Oh, but I misheard you," said Bodonus, laughing heartily, "I thought you said *truck divers*!"
>
> *Moral.* What it is to be a near-Eastern politician!

Then you would have recognized it, and it would not have been the future of humour.

I shall pass on to my Danish Grandmother, and write a few much easier pages. For, as I said, before, *Vos estis*. You be.

MRS FISHER

My Danish Grandmother had three bucolic sayings and one joke. From the three sayings it should, I suppose, be possible to plot the perfect sphere of her mind and so appreciate the one joke. The first of the sayings was: "Children, I beg you, as your grandmother, never to swing objects around in your hands. The King of Hanover put out his eye by swinging a bead purse."

Grandmother herself always carried a bead-purse. The second saying was like the first: "Children, I beg you, as a grandmother, to be careful when you carry your candles up to bed. The candle is a little cup of grease." The third always puzzled me. "There was a man once, a Frenchman, who died of grief because he could never become a mother." As for the story, it was told in candle-light every Sunday evening.

"There was once a peasant family living in Schleswig-Holstein, where they all have crooked mouths, and one night they wished to blow out the candle. The father's mouth was twisted to the left, so!—and he tried to blow out the candle, so!—but he was too proud to stand anywhere but directly before the candle, and he puffed and he puffed but could not blow the candle out. And then the mother tried, but her mouth was twisted to the right so!—and she tried to blow so!—and she was too proud to stand anywhere but directly before the candle, and she puffed and puffed but could not blow the candle out. Then there was the brother with mouth twisted outward, so!—and the sister with the mouth twisted downward, so!—and they tried each in their turn, so!—and so!—and the idiot baby with his mouth twisted in an eternal grin tried so! And at last the

maid, a beautiful girl from Copenhagen with a perfectly formed mouth, put it out with her shoe. So! Flap!"

And we were left in darkness. And we would ask grandmother why the maid put it out with her shoe and not with her mouth; and we would get a different answer every time. Either she said it was because the girl came from Copenhagen where girls are very quick-witted, or because she was impatient, or because she was polite, or because she was laughing so much that she could not blow, or because of this or because of that. She never would tell us why, but that we felt that she was hiding something, a secret joke of her own. And at last she promised to tell us before she died. And years later when she was very ill and very old and was told that she was dying she wrote to us that the reason that the girl had put the candle out with

her shoe was that this was the best way to prevent the wick smoking.

"But," objected Rose, who of all of us most resembled Grandmother, "what thoughtlessness! The grease must have splashed all about in the dark." So we saw Grandmother's joke at last. Then Rose said to me that probably Grandmother had also fooled us with the bead-purse, swinging it dangerously in the dark as soon as she had shattered the little cup of grease. As for the man, the Frenchman, I know now that Grandmother was in a degree of humour at least beyond the approved official scale of a hundred years hence.

I come, as Grandmother herself informed me, of very Mendelian stock. I had an Uncle Max who was a sort of Irishman. His sense of humour was always uncertain and compelling. Once at Seaford, at the very end of the holiday

season, he bought up the balloon-woman's entire stock and brought it pole and all back to our lodging-house. He took the balloons upstairs to his room (it was rather a squeeze up the narrow stairs) and shut the door carefully behind him. Of course we took turns at the keyhole watching. He took a pin and slowly punctured them one after another with a safety-pin, laughing softly to himself as they shrivelled. He was very methodical, pricking them in the order of the colours of the rainbow, starting with violet and ending up with red. He cast suspicious glances at the door from time to time, and at last when all the balloons were gone he hid the pole up the chimney. Then he came rushing out of the room in a great hurry with the soot still on his hands and stumbled over us ; we ran away and he pursued us down the passage and made us promise

never to tell anyone what we had seen so long as he was alive.

We knew about the order of the colours of the rainbow from Uncle Max himself. He told us one day at dinner that they were always in the same order and it was a curious thing that the first letters of the names of the colours made a word, and not only a word but an important word. And after we had guessed all sorts of likely words such as "Uncle Max", "Coronation", "Mafeking", and "Seaford", he told us solemnly that the word was VIBGYOR, and then got up and said Grace.

One day we children found him on the pebbled garden-path, eating the pebbles. He told us to go away, but of course we didn't: we sat down and tried to eat pebbles too. He told us very seriously that eating pebbles was not a thing for children to do; we should break

our teeth. We agreed after trying one or two; so to get rid of us he found us each a pebble which looked just like all the other pebbles but which crushed easily and had a chocolate centre. But this was only on condition that we went away and left him to his picking and crunching. When we came back later in the day we searched and searched, but only found the ordinary hard pebbles.

He never once let us down in a joke, and even kept aloof from us when we grew up for the sake of the jokes he had once made. The last I saw of Uncle Max was during the War. Uncle Max was a soldier, a major in the Cavalry, who went out to France with the first Expeditionary Force. He came home on leave from France (in the Spring of 1915) and, as I accidentally discovered, spent his time walking about Town giving elaborate salutes to newly-joined

temporary second lieutenants and raising his cap to dug-out Colonels and Generals. Then he went back and was killed at once at Festubert—intentionally, his men said.

This deadliness of Uncle Max made a strong impression on us. We found out by watching him that a joke is a secret thing, not to be pawed over or breathed hard upon, to be taken very casually. So Catherine, who of us all most resembled Uncle Max, caught in the larder (where she was picking almonds off the cake) and asked what she was doing in there, had the presence of mind to answer: "Thinking out a surprise for my birthday," and to walk absent-mindedly away, and to offer no further explanations. I only know about it because I was eating biscuits behind the door when Catherine came in. And another day we two were out together walking in

North Wales on the desolate moors at the back of the mountains by Harlech. We had not seen a soul all day. At last we came to a waterfall and two trout lying on the bank beside it; ten yards away was the fisherman. He was disentangling his line from a thornbush and had not seen us. So we crept up quietly to the fish and put a sprig of white-bell-heather (which we had found that afternoon) in the mouth of each. We hurried back to cover, and I said: "Shall we watch?" but Catherine said: "No, don't spoil it," remembering Uncle Max. So we came home and never spoke of it again even to each other: and never knew the sequel.

Uncle Max was, as I said, an Irishman. I shall close the gallery of my relatives with an account of my Scottish Aunt Jeannie. Now, why the Scots offend as humorists is not that they are not

witty: they are a good deal wittier than the English and only less witty than the Irish. Nor is it that their humour never exceeds their intelligence, as in the case of the French. It is that they will make sure of their joke, hold it triumphantly up to the light, shake it to see if it rattles inside. For instance, before I reach my Aunt Jeannie, there was Dr Logan, author of the great channel hoax. She was making a typically Scotch joke. She pretended to swim the channel, signed a statutory declaration to say that she had accepted a thousand-pound cheque offered by a Sunday paper, and then went and owned up. She returned the cheque, explained that she was calling attention to the ease with which sportsmen and sportswomen could not really swim the channel. That was not funny, everyone said, and so Dr Logan was charged with perjury, con-

demned and fined a lot of money. And everyone was right. Dr Logan had spoilt what might easily have been a very good joke. She should never have owned up, should have had a good time with the thousand pounds or dedicated it to medical research in the cause and cure of swimmer's cramp, should have kept her joke religiously to herself. Then, if she had eventually been betrayed by one of the boatmen, her accomplices, she would at least have had her joke and the warning to the public as to how easily it could be imposed on would have had a real point.

The Scots are at their best when they quote from the Scriptures, because once the chapter and verse is quoted there is no more to be done about it. You can't tease the joke further. The late W. P. Ker once made what I thought at the time a good one. The occasion was

a lecture on " The English Spirit " by a gross, strutting, big-bellied publicist. Ker watched him murderously, and when it was all over gave as his verdict : " *Judges*, iii, 22, *And the dirt came out.* Which, though it has nothing to do with the future of humour, sounded very well in the Scottish accent.

Aunt Jeannie. She is a respectable Scottish widow—a class of women for whom the Insurance Company has built up a quite unjustified public confidence. (This is not a comic joke, but a libel.) Her husband, Max's brother, was a professor of history at a Scottish University. When he died he left a fortune quite out of proportion to his income : this was easily accounted for by his accurate knowledge of the flaws in the pedigrees of four or five of the richest and most honourable Scottish houses. Being Irish, he enjoyed his

joke and kept it to himself. All his earnings from this source he eventually left to an Irish University for the foundation of a Chair of Irish Genealogical History. What remained did not satisfy Jeannie, who supported her Scottish widowhood by a cruder blackmail and by simple theft. She once got possession of some silver spoons of mine by a trick and nearly succeeded in taking them off to France with her. I arrived indignantly just in time and made her take them out of her trunk on the platform at Victoria Station. Later I was sent a postcard from Paris saying that, "The trouble with you Englishmen (sic) is that you have no sense of humour." If I had thought that she meant by this that she intended to steal those spoons (as I knew she had already stolen some candlesticks of Grandmother's, and a second edition of *Paradise Lost* from

Uncle Max's library), I would not have minded so much. A thief in the family can be a good joke. But I knew that what she really meant was that she had intended to send me back the spoons from France to show how easily I could be hoaxed. That made me simply furious, because she was, I knew, quite capable of the loganism.

A comparison between spade-humour and spillikin-humour. Welsh humour is the simplest form of spade-humour that I know, the most restful and the most idiotic. It is folk-humour, which means that it does not get less personal by diffusion, because the persons concerned do not vary personally. They are all equally nit-wit. I indulgently quote an example or two.

A minister takes for his text: "The high hills are a refuge for the wild-goat and so are the stony rocks for the conies."

" Brethren," he says, " Christian men ! what wass *coniss* ? What, I say to you, wass *coniss* ? Wass it lions ? No ! Wass it TIGERS ? No ! Wass it ELEPHANTS ? NO ! " " Brethren," he says, " Christian men ! What wass coniss ? . . . Coniss wass a little wee rabbit, you see."

On the quay at Bardsey Island. Alfie Jones, a young islander, is returning from a visit to the mainland. His father shouts to him from a window as the boat is drawing up : " Alfie, Alfie, stupid lad ! What in the name of fortune have you there in that parcel under your arm, lad ? "

" My trousseau, pa ! For my marriage on Sunday, pa ! "

" Your trousseau, stupid lad ? "

" Ay, pa, my trousseau ! A pair of new English boots with real porpoise-leather boot-laces ! "

Dai Jones was a miner of Tonypandy

and he had a dream. He dreamed of Paradise. He was in a mighty great amphitheatre in a mighty great angelic choir. And they were singing hymns: they were indeed singing Welsh hymns. All were dressed in white standing in endless pews. There were millions of tenors, millions of contraltos, millions of sopranos, millions of trebles; and only one bass—Dai Jones himself. The angelic conductor rapped with his baton on a magnificent harmonium that was beside him and cried with a loud voice: "Brothers and Sisters, we will now sing Doctor Parry's world-famous melody *Aberystwyth*. And the whole choir of Paradise crashed into the opening bars. Oh, boys, it was a glorious harmony indeed of all those millions of saints singing together in unison. But hardly had they started when the conductor was seen to drop his baton and wave his

arms to stop the music. And the music ceased, and there came a great calm, and the conductor was heard to say: "Champion! champion! my brothers and sisters," but he said, too: "Dai Jones, too much bass!"

My grandfather's gold-headed spade. Compare with it the Chinese spillikin, the most nervous humour of all. I was once told, by a highbrow humorist, the Classical Chinese jests which are supposed to represent the two bottom spillikins of the whole delicate pile. He told me that after Chinese humour it was impossible to enjoy European humour at all. He said that the future of humour was inevitably Chinese. The first jest was:

An influential mandarin, by the machinations of certain of his enemies, was reduced from a position of affluence and security to one of infinite misery. He retired to a cell on the To mountain

where he spent the remainder of his life inscribing with a burnt stick upon the walls of his apartment: "Oh, oh! strange business!"

The second:

The celebrated sage and ascetic Feng after thirty years withdrawal from the world attained to such sanctitude that he was able without suspicion to hold upon his knee and fondle Miss Ise, a famous beauty, daughter of the Mandarin Soin, his old schoolfellow.

It only remains to decide now whether the Chinese play spillikins with spades, or whether the Welsh shovel coal with spillikins. For the centuried refinement of Chinese humour results, in the first case, in a joke not at all to be distinguished in quality from that of Alfie Jones and his laces, and in the second in a joke only rather more compact and dry than "Strong in Prayer", a Welsh story

about the many unprintable shortcomings of the famous Revivalist preacher, Rev. Crawshay Bailey.

"Ay (said Dr Johnson), that is the state of the world. Water is the same everywhere."

This, of course, leads nowhere. All I can say is that if the humour of to-morrow is really to be a strict sort of Chinese Classicism (with Welsh affinities) then the reaction of the day after to-morrow will probably be to the so-called "pure humour" of the day before yesterday —the irresponsible after-dinner fable-without-moral of the Edwardian era. Let me recall one or two of these fables, whose claim to purity is that they are neither topical nor directed towards any classical point.

A man once went into Buszard's and ordered a cake. He explained diffidently that it was rather an unusual order.

He wanted the cake shaped like a letter S. The manager said that it certainly was somewhat difficult; a special mould would have to be made, but he could promise to make a satisfactory job of it. When it was ready the man arrived and said: "I am really delighted with the cake, but it was very stupid of me; I did not make my order clear. I wanted a small s, not a capital S." The manager apologized and promised to have a new cake made by the following week. When it was ready, the man came again. "Yes, that is exactly right." "Where shall I send it?" asked the manager. "Send it?" said the man, surprised. "Oh, please don't trouble to send it. Just give me a knife, a plate, and a little bread and butter, and I'll eat it at once."

To which may be added the *Fable of the Young Serpent*, which as nearly as I can recall goes like this: "A young

serpent was one day surprised by her mother in the act of trying on a new bonnet in front of the pier-glass. 'Where are you going?' asked the fond parent. 'Nowhere, nowhere at all,' replied the startled daughter, 'not even into the Garden.' . . ." And then there was the mathematician at a dinner party who, on being passed a bowl of salad (while engaged in animated conversation with a lady on his left), absent-mindedly emptied it on his head. When his attention was called to what he had just done, he replied in some confusion, "And I had thought it was the spinach."

This salad joke, with one or two others of the same sort that I have forgotten, was given in a correspondence in the *Morning Post*, a few years before the War, as to whether women had a sense of humour. It was alleged that no woman ever laughed at it. I repeated it once

with the *Fable of the Young Serpent*, to the late W. H. R. Rivers, the psychologist. He enjoyed them both, I think, on their own merits, but denied their purity. He said that they were perfect examples of wit according to Freud's theory of symbols. He would not believe that the *Young Serpent* had not been deliberately composed with one eye on Freud (though I knew for a fact that it had not) and the salad joke was perfectly obvious. " Why no woman laughs at it is because the symbolism of crowning the head with salad or spinach is one that would have active appeal to the male sexual fantasy in suppression and none to the female. And much as one dislikes accepting Freud's conclusions, the trouble is that he is so often right." Now, as a matter of fact, I have since found that women do think the fable funny though, like the others, too delicate to be

laughed aloud at. And I do not think that the joke has anything more to do with sex than it has with mathematicians. It is a very gentle joke. If a Scot picks it up and shakes it he will not make it rattle. But it is not really pure humour because it depends too much on style; it is not as irresponsible as it looks. It only differs from Classicism by not ending, so to speak, with a comfortable mark of exclamation, but with an uneasy comma.

As for Freudian humour, it is a very low form. If you accept an arbitrary group of symbols — serpents, salads, umbrellas, tunnels — as having a suppressed sex-significance, all you have to do is to laugh cynically whenever they occur. Which is boringly often. A woman, if she can be bothered, can have this sense of humour as easily as a man.

The dictionary definition of humour

is the faculty of appreciating the incongruous elements in ideas and situations. That is about what one would expect from a dictionary. On the contrary (though this is not intended for a definition) humour is rather the faculty of seeing apparently incongruous elements as part of a scheme for supra-logical necessity. Humour is not of the Gods, who have, as has been already said, only the most rudimentary sense of the ridiculous, but of the Fates and of this Necessity, who is, according to the Greek theologians at least, above all the Gods. Humour is pitiless, not with crude pitilessness, as when the Gods laughed at Hephæstus, but with metaphysical pitilessness. There is no suppressed anti-negro or sadistic element in me that makes me laugh at the story of the two coloured women—who were walking outside a Chicago slaughter-house over a piece of

waste ground littered with the offal of cattle, horses, and donkeys—when one of them, looking at something lying at her feet, exclaimed: "O Mercy, the Klu Klux done got our beloved Pastor." Nor is it an anti-rectorial fixation that makes me laugh at to-day's newspaper poster: RECTOR'S FIGHT FOR HIS HONOUR: PICTURES. I am almost as sorry for the Rector as for the heroine of yesterday's headline: STRUGGLE IN WOOD, who gave the Rector's fight congruity. Humour is perhaps the economical equating of concepts which are by definition unequatable. Thus: "The Navel is to the Nobility as Death is to Dentifrice" may be used as a casual class-room formula. But not more than once. Nor can the elements of the equation be shifted about to make a fresh joke every time, thus: "Dentifrice is to the Navel as Death is to the Nobility." That lands you into

the re-shuffling humour of French bedroom farce: $(\theta-\theta)^n$. The remainder of this chapter (to quote Bertrand Russell) may be omitted by readers who have not even the most elementary acquaintance with geometry or algebra. In fact, I shall omit it myself and pass on to a death-bed scene and its congruities.

The death-bed scene. An old man, dying, has called his six sons and four daughters about him. Before he passes away he has a terrible confession to make. For a long while he struggles with shame. Finally he beckons the eldest son and whispers: "What I have to confess to you is this—I was never married to your mother." No need for the eldest son to repeat the message, so tense the silence that all have heard it. The old man falls back on his pillows, dead. A few moments' pause, broken at last by the

voice of the youngest daughter: "Well, I don't know what you other barstards are going to do, but I'm off to the Movies."

Humour and hysteria. They both use the laugh, but they are far apart. Humour is reasonable, in measure. Hysteria is unreasonable, beyond measure. The laughter in humour is voluntary and proportioned; in hysteria it is involuntary and disproportioned. No humour was ever enough by itself to put anyone in a state of uncontrolled laughter; the confusion between humour and hysteria has been made by professional humorists who force their audiences out of control by bullying them with some small shred of humour, the smaller and sillier the better. They stage a misunderstanding, say, over the town of Ware, the river Wye, or Witch House in Watt Street, until the suspense becomes insupportable, a girl in the

gallery goes into hysterics and the rest of the audience follows in sympathy. This is how Budd and Judd become great comedians. A good deal even of Chaplin's humour is hysterical. The first comedy in which he ever appeared, *Kid's Auto Races*, consists of nothing but Charlie as the dude continually posing in front of the camera-man who is trying to film the auto-races, continually being thrown out of the way, and continually returning.

The Board of Humour will no doubt improve the technique of comic bullying. Its photo-tone gagsmen will know exactly how near the stage-gardener must come to falling into the gold-fish pond, and how often he must stand on the points of the rake and be rapped on the nose by the handle, and how many panes of the cucumber frame he must break, before general hysteria supervenes.

There is, by the way, one form of humour at least that the Board will never be able to organize, and that is the quiet personal joy of keeping a pet. The best pet is a public character, one of the many uninventably extravagant creatures always loose in public life, and the game is watching it behave miraculously true to itself. For instance, one of the closest ties that binds me to my friend R, to whom I dedicate this book, is our simultaneous discovery of a contemporary poet whom for some reason or other we called "Up the Airy Mountain", or "Airy" for short. Airy began eight years ago as the monthly prize-winner of the half-guinea prize for the best lyric in *The Nine Muses: A Magazine of Verse*, after which he graduated and became the quarterly prize-winner of the guinea-and-a-half prize for the best lyric in *Helicon*: *A*

Journal of Poetry. He was up the airy mountain all right, and what we liked about him was that he still continued to be the monthly prize-winner in *The Nine Muses*, and still so continues. He has never kicked away the ladder beneath him. Five years ago he published his first book, which had a great popular success, for Airy was clever: he had already secured the silence of all the high-brow poets and critics by becoming poetry-reviewer in chief to the *Weekly Conservative* and the *Weekly Diehard*, and reader to a new publishing firm specializing in Modernist Poetry. His path was clear. R and I watched his progress with satisfaction: there is no joy in keeping a pet unless it thrives. I had a joke on R when I was quoted somewhere as one of the most promising of our young poets sandwiched between the Sitwells and Airy Mountain. But

R scored by getting an application from Airy himself for a poem for an anthology : the letter contained the phrase, " though I have a greater respect for your poetry than I fear you have for mine." I would ask R : " What news of Airy this week ? " and R would answer : " Mr Airy again triumphs in his new volume of lyrics, " *Thou Lily.*" And I would say, " I can cap that " : " We are happy to announce that Mr Airy the Poet has undertaken to become contributing editor to *The Aristotelian* " (which was the arch-highbrow stronghold). " Yes, that's pretty good," said R ; " but this, in its way, is better," and showed me the American advertisement of *Sanctus Spiritus* heavily lettered as " THE GREAT POEM OF MANKIND " with a portrait of Airy posed as John Keats ; for R and I have a standing competition for the best exhibit in a gallery " Homage to Airy

Mountain". R usually wins, having a quicker intuition than I as to where and how Airy will fulfil himself next. We got a good story about Airy and the bookshops. He went one day to an obscure bookshop in the suburbs and inquired: "Have you by chance any first editions of Mountain's poems?" The bookseller said casually: "Oh, yes, sir, I think we have one or two about somewhere in the back of the shop." "I hear that they are commanding big prices now?" said Airy. "Oh, no," said the bookseller, "oh, not at all, Mr Airy Mountain!" R and I hesitated for a long time before actually meeting Airy: we were afraid of disappointment.

At last, after a few drinks, we went to see him act as judge in an elocution contest, and sat at the back of the hall. He was magnificent, better even than the illustration to *The Great Poem of*

Mankind. He was sallow and lean with a face like Dante's, suppose Dante had taken after the wrong aunt, and walked with a springy step and carried a dark yellow portfolio, and talked with a dark yellow voice and wore side-whiskers of the pattern known prettily as "Friendship-grips". The set-piece for the competition was one of Airy's own, and the whole performance was so perfect that R said: "Come out now, don't spoil it. He'll recite it himself to show how it should be done and I think it would be bad for my heart." So we went out, and a sudden gloom descended on us, which R broke at last by voicing the thought that was in my mind too: "My God! wouldn't it be awful if Airy died on us." *What fond and wayward thoughts will slide into a lover's head!*

And yet a pet may easily be lost: it may be stolen by others and made

not a pet but a scapegoat of their own vulgarities. Indeed this is what has happened to our Airy : he is sinking into pathos ; with these others it is righteousness and criticism, with us it was a fondness. And even before this he had begun to pine away. One day we followed him rather too closely and lovingly when we happened to see him coming out of Hatchard's in Piccadilly with a *de luxe* edition of *The Great Poem of Mankind* in his hand. He got thoroughly scared, hid the book under his coat, and jumped into a taxi. From then on he was never the same for us. We had crossed the thin line between cossetting and teasing and he had mistaken us for persecutors.

My own limitations of humour. To those that are already apparent I must add that I cannot laugh at jokes about childbirth or jokes about mothers-in-law.

They belong to the same tradition of male humour that includes jokes about drunk men coming home late at night after sleeping with chorus girls. Here I am too symmetrically minded. I do not think mothers-in-law and drunken husbands funny, because they have no popular counterpart in fathers-in-law or in drunken wives coming home late at night after sleeping with guardsmen. As for childbirth jokes, I would appreciate their brutality if they were obviously invented by married women for the enlivenment of mothers' meetings, and not by unmarried men as bonds of legal, medical, commercial, military, or ecclesiastical fraternity.

Male humour is only tolerable when it is directed against itself. Driving once near Amiens with an old Spanish Colonel, I asked him to tell me about the various places of interest that we passed. He

did so. He knew a lot about the churches and the castles and public institutions. At last he pointed out a very richly decorated villa perched on a hill and surrounded by luxurious gardens. "That is a house that you should visit, young man."

"What is remarkable about it, Colonel?"

"Listen! you go up that path among the roses and you ring at the side door—not the front door, remember! After a few minutes it will be opened to you by an enormous negro, really enormous. He is two metres and a quarter in height and dressed entirely in scarlet. He will blindfold your eyes and lead you to a room where there are twenty girls seated at tables. They are all exquisitely beautiful girls dressed in the height of fashion. They are all different in type; tall, small, medium, with yellow hair or black or brown or red. You can choose

whom you fancy and sit at her table. She will invite you to drink with her, and you can choose what drink you like—it is a marvellous cellar—and you need pay nothing for it. Then she will invite you to play a game with her. You can choose the game: it may be draughts or chess or backgammon or cribbage or what you like. And if you win the game you can take the girl whom you have beaten to a private room close by and kiss and embrace her to your heart's content. But I warn you, young man, that you have to be very very clever at your game to beat any of these girls. They are marvellous players."

"Naturally," I said, "but what is the penalty if one loses?"

"Oh, then," replied the Colonel, in a tempest of laughter, "then you yourself are Aristotled by the enormous negro."

Apart from this sort of joke, I don't,

as I say, like male humour. And I don't like jokes about tramps at the back-door and their dislike of work, because I know too much about workhouses and the low diet of the casual ward. I don't mind cruel jokes about War so long as they are made by soldiers during the War. Let me record in outline one or two of the most satisfying jokes that I ever laughed at. They were made in France in an infantry division so popular at Headquarters that it was given the honour of losing the equivalent of its entire combatant strength every six months or so. The subject of the first joke was Lieutenant A, a bullying, boastful, cowardly fellow who was always saving his skin at someone else's expense. He had always managed to go sick or get sent on a course when fighting was expected, and had finally dug himself in as Divisional Something-or-other and

evaded trench-service altogether. One night he was foolish enough to get drunk and disorderly at an Officers' Club at Amiens and was returned to the battalion the day before a particularly bloody "show"—to the delight of everyone but the platoon he was to command. As luck would have it, he was slightly wounded in the arm two hours before the attack (he was suspected of having exposed his arm to a sniper) and retired laughing. The joke came later when the eighty unwounded survivors of the battalion and the two or three hundred wounded survivors heard that Lieutenant A, while riding triumphantly back in an ambulance, had been bombed by an aeroplane twenty miles behind the line and had one of his buttocks ripped right off. This must not be mistaken for a variation on the *Miles Gloriosus* joke of Latin comedy. Lieutenant A was too

personally loathsome to be a type, and he died of wounds like any hero. I have since seen his memorial brass.

A certain F, a private in the same battalion, was sent to draw the rum-issue from the reserve line just before the same show. We were shivering in the rain in the support-line waiting to attack behind the front-line company. F was an ex-burglar and should never have been trusted with the mission. The other companies got the rum, ours didn't. At last the order came to fix bayonets and go forward. As we poured into the communication trench, F staggered up, retching and red-faced, hugging the rum jar. He had lost his rifle, helmet, and equipment, and was singing an obscene song about the Warder's daughter of Wormwood Scrubs. The Germans were accurately shelling the muddy communication-trench with six-inch shells, and there

was a stream of wounded and gassed men on stretchers blocking our way. "Here you are, Captain," cried F merrily, and fell forward into the mud. "Thank you, F," it seems D, the Company Commander, answered, putting one foot on F's neck and one on the small of his back and treading him deep into the mud. And then, "Company forward!" The whole company passed over F as over any other corpse; including (I suppose) myself who, as second in command, brought up the rear. F was never heard of again. His fate was "missing, believed dead", and we laughed at it over the breakfast marmalade two days later. It helped us to forget that D was also among the missing.

D had been our chief wit. We were sitting at breakfast one day when D's servant rushed in without saluting and in great terror. "Gas, sir! They're

using gas!" "Good!" said D sweetly, "Bring me some more marmalade and my respirator!" A broader type of joke was provided by E, a cut-throat comrade of F. (They had applied for the position of Company wiring-men, whose job it was to repair the barbed-wire entanglements. I found out that they liked the job because of the opportunity it gave them of looting the dead. F got a purse of German gold 20-mark pieces from a leg that he found lying quite alone in a shell-hole—that was another very good joke in the battalion.) E one morning saw that an angle of the trench had collapsed, disclosing a pair of boots belonging to a corpse. At one of these he tugged, in the hope of loot, shouting cheerfully: "Come out, my lad, your King and Country needs you!" He tugged harder, the corpse refusing to budge, and he went over backwards into

a sump-pit full of liquid mud with the boots, and the feet in them, in his hands.

These jokes are disgusting ? Absolutely. Not funny ? Not in the least now. But they were once in their context extraordinarily funny. Now we are back to rolling pins and wasp-nests. Funny ? But when the next war comes, it will be back to ripped buttocks, missing believed killed, and good-bye everyone. Funny.

I have often been accused of sentimentality because I am loyal to the cheese joke, which, it will be remembered, was only put in the third degree of academic humour. It is classed by my revolutionary friends with my devotion to folk-song, Hanoverian Royalty,[1] and

[1] This devotion I can always justify by the story of the royal golf-ball (testified to by the late Mr Theodore Cook, of *The Field*) which left a royal tee on Sandringham links and was lost for several minutes until found by chance in the ear of a royal cow.

Nature. I do not choose to argue about the cheese joke. I am not ashamed of it even though I share it with *Punch*—I may say at once that but for the cheese, most of the smells of *Punch* go altogether against my stomach. I can't, for instance, keep down jokes about vulgar society parvenues, about weary mistresses and impudent servants, about ingenuous mothers and precocious children, about the working man on the dole, about dear old clergymen and village reprobates, about doctors and ignorant patients—particularly when these are never qualified by jokes about society from the parvenue's point of view, or jokes about impudent mistresses and weary servants, about ingenuous children and precocious mothers, about the employer not on the dole, about dear old villagers and reprobate clergymen, about patients and ignorant doctors. I think that it would

have been far more dignified of *Punch* if he had been content to remain where he began, with hump and nut-cracker face as his whole stock-in-trade, in the first degree of academic humour. It would at least have saved him from the indignity of being the subject of degree five.

When the phrase "Good enough for *Punch*!" rises in my throat, it means that I am about to be really sick—as once when darling Pamela Diana, adored child of a member of the Stock Exchange and a lady of fashion, actually and genuinely (and in my hearing) came out with the *mot*: "Daddy spends all his time buying pennies for Mummy!"

One day perhaps I shall accidentally meet Sir Owen Seaman, the editor of *Punch*. I rather like the idea of him. I have never met him, but he has a very charming practice of returning nearly all

manuscripts sent to him with detailed explanations of why they are not funny. The others he prints. I heard a story about Sir Owen which also involves a story about Pavlova. Two old Scottish ladies were sitting in the gallery at a Glasgow Theatre watching Pavlova dance in the tragic ballet *Mort de Cygne*. And one said to the other: "She's awfu' like oor Mrs Wishart." And when Sir Owen was told of this by a Scotsman who had overheard it, he asked briskly: "And, pray, who is this Mrs Fisher?" Well, who *is* Mrs Fisher? The Editor of *Punch* didn't know. His informant didn't know. I don't know. But her existence was assumed by the Editor of *Punch* as the embodiment of a joke that was beyond him. And she sounds very likely. I suspect that she is the Future of Humour itself. At all events I am giving her the benefit of the doubt.

MRS FISHER

I once decided to send a contribution to *Punch* to see what letter I would get in reply. Hunting about for suitable bait, I found a transcription of essays by Egyptian students whom I had been examining (I can't now remember why) for a Teaching Diploma at the High Training College at Cairo. The essays which, I hope, have nothing to do with the Future of Humour, went like this :

Environment as a Factor in Evolutions

This is the theory of evolutions. Once it was thought that the earth's crust was caused by catastrophes, but when Darwin came into the world and had a good deal of philosophy, he said : " All different kinds of species differ gradually as we go backwards and there is no catastrophes, and if we apply the fact upon previous predecessors we reach simpler and simpler predecessors, until we reach the Nature." Man also is under the evolutions. None can deny this if he could deny the sun in daylight. A child from the beginning of the birthday possesses insects like to suckle his food from the mamel of his mother and many others. But he is free of habits and he is weak as anything.

Then he is introduced into a house and usually finds himself among parents and his body is either cleansed or left to the dirts. This shows his environment. Superficial thinkers are apt to look on environment as (at best) a trifle motive in bringing up, but learned men believe that a child born in the presence of some women who say a bad word, this word, as believed by them, remains in the brain of the child until it ejects.

Environment quickly supplies modification. The life of mountainous goats leads them to train themselves on jumping. The camel is flat-footed with hoofs for the sand. Some kind of cattle were wild in the past, but lived in plain lands and changed into gentle sheep. The frog when young has her tail and nostrils like the fish, suitable for life at sea, but changing her environment, the tail decreased. The sea is broad and changeable, so those who live at sea are changeable and mysterious. Put a cow in a dirty damp place, and she will become more and more slender until she die. Also horses: horse had five fingers on his legs but now only one from running for water in the draught. Climate also affects bodily habits of the dear Europeans who live in Egypt. They who were smart and patient and strong with a skin worth the name of weatherproof become also fatigable and fond of leisure. . . . From the theory we learn that human beings should be improved like the beasts by creating healthy youngs and by good Freubel education.

MRS FISHER

THE CHARACTER OF LADY MACBETH

Sir, to write shortly, Lady Macbeth was brave and venturesome; but she had no tact. She says to Macbeth: "Now the opportunity creates itself, lose it not. Where is your manlihood in these suitable circumstances? I have children and I know the love of a mother's heart. But you must know I would dash the child's head and drive away the boneless teeth which are milking me rather than to give a promise and then leave it."

Macbeth says: "But we may fail."

"Fail?" says Laby Macbeth, "but stick to the point and we will not fail. Leave the rest to me. I shall put drugs in the grooms' drink, and we shall ascuse them."

Macbeth says: "You are fit to lay men children only."

The impression on the reader becomes very great, and feels with anger.

The experiment was successful. Sir Owen replied in a holograph letter that the essays were not acceptable because he couldn't himself write a word of Arabic. (For, pray, who is Mrs Fisher?)

I would not be prepared to deny absolutely the possibility of humour in *Punch*. There is a tendency on the

part of some of the best jokes of all to improve themselves by their setting—the school-room, the asylum, the prison-cell, the death-bed. Several jokes in the last few years have been witty enough to conceal themselves in the joke-corners of daily newspapers. And if ever, thousands of years hence, a Phœnix of a joke appears flying with purple wings and barred tail-feathers across the Western world and looks for an altar on which to consume itself, there is little doubt in my mind where that altar will be found: Phœnix will blaze up in glory among the "Charivaria" of *Punch* and all subscriptions will cease and there will be no more national humorous weekly, and Mrs Fisher will descend and reign her thousand years.

If when we are considering the future of humour we find ourselves in a sort of morbid jealousy of the opportunities

that posterity will have for laughing at us, why don't we forestall posterity? The laughs are all here. But we do not laugh because to laugh would mean seeing that things are as goddawful as they are; and if we did this, we shouldn't laugh—we'd do something about them first. And maybe even then we shouldn't laugh. And maybe even posterity won't laugh—either because it will see how goddawful the things really were or because, more likely, they will still be unchanged and still goddawful and posterity won't see them as goddawful any more than they are seen now.

So let us at this point, reader, have a private laugh of our own, for when may it ever come to this again? At the adventures of meat from the stock-yards to the docks and from the dock-yards to the gas-stove; at pedestrians forced to cross main-roads between trams, 'buses,

and private cars; at correct evening-wear for men; at the prudery of the revues; at women who start with quite good names of their own and who marry and call themselves, say, the Mrs John Smiths and then divorce the Mr John Smiths for sleeping illegitimately with the Mrs James Smiths, and then when the Mr James Smiths divorce the Mrs James Smiths and the Mrs James Smiths, legitimately this time, sleep with the Mr John Smiths and become the Mrs John Smiths, nevertheless remain the Mrs John Smiths unless they happen to marry again and become, say, the Mrs James Smiths; at dust-carts; at street-musicians; at sporting-prints; at representative government; at the amateur status in first-class cricket; at visiting-cards; at district-visitors; at advertising; at the shapes of sofas and the choice of electric lamp-shades; at the millions of

victims (but let us lower our voices at this point, for we are about to commit a misdemeanour) of the economic system who unaccountably refrain from bashing in the skulls of the few thousand victors with paving-stones, whip-butts, coal-picks, empty champagne-bottles, or heavy spanners whenever they come across them ; at flowered cretonnes ; at medical etiquette ; at the price of old masters ; at the contents of china-shops. Speaking of china-shops, the following is clipped from an official list of military stores published for the current year :

Vessels, CHBR : Porcelain, with rims and handles, officers, for the use of.

Do : China, rimless, with handles, warrant-officers, for the use of.

Do : Earthenware, rimless, without handles, other ranks, for the use of.

Vessels, CHBR : India-rubber, collapsible, mental cases, for the use of.

When things are really goddawful like this, it is no use trying to reform them by any earnest means—spreading Communist leaflets among the armed forces of the Crown, wrecking the pot-banks of Stoke-on-Trent, or committing Suicide and leaving an explanatory manifesto behind. Even to write them up in the Sinclair Lewis style is merely to ask for a *Punch* laugh from readers of the *New Leader* or the *American Mercury*. The one possible way to beat them is to see if they can by any ingenuity be made a little more goddawful than they are and so beat themselves. In this particular case it might be necessary to threaten a question in the House and so blackmail the Army Council into providing a new type of vessel-chbr—cut-glass,

with two handles, and a rim emblazoned with regimental battle-honours, field-officers for the use of. Swift wrote his *Modest Proposal for preventing the children of poor people from being a burden to their parents or the country*, and Defoe his *Shortest Way with Dissenters*, in this sort of spirit; though they were both unable to go as far as they should and press their schemes into operation.

A few years ago my friend Z found himself oppressed by general goddawfulness. In public life nothing of any note was happening, except that the nation was just beginning to realize that the War was now over and had to be paid for; and that *The Carpenter's Shop* was about to be sold to an American dealer and everyone was pretending to regret the impending loss. In private life nothing much was happening either except that Z had been given the dreary

task of disposing of a single pet-goldfish for a friend who was shutting up her flat and going abroad to the Riviera.

So, to improve on this doubly goddawful situation, he decided that the goldfish would have to save *The Carpenter's Shop* for the Nation. He took a 'bus to the National Gallery. He put the goldfish into a fountain near the entrance and called the attention of one of the Gallery officials to it. "Do you see this goldfish?" "Well, what about it?" "This goldfish is going to save *The Carpenter's Shop* for the nation." The official, alarmed, ran into the Gallery. Z went to his club and wrote a letter, something like this, to one of the Saturday reviews:

SIR,—I have to-day put a goldfish into the fountain at the entrance to the National Gallery as a broad hint to my art-loving millionaire relatives that they should put down the few thousand pounds necessary to save that exquisite Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece *The Carpenter's Shop* from following our other national art-treasures to America.

The Sunday press made a scare-line of it : POET'S STRANGE ACTION. FISH PLACED IN FOUNTAIN. And early the next week Z's millionaire relatives wrote the cheque. The following Saturday, Z visited the Gallery and heard the same official, concluding a lecture-tour of the rooms, finish up with : " And one more thing, ladies and gentlemen. Here is the famous goldfish that has saved *The Carpenter's Shop* for the nation."

This sort of humour is what I suppose would be called realism. It has great possibilities. But one would have to be very energetic to use it systematically : to be bothered to add more wheels and levers and cylinders to the already insane machinery of civilization, to make it function still more insanely. Perhaps Mrs Fisher is the woman to undertake it ; certainly no man would ever have

the brilliant thoroughness to carry it through. She will, I believe, first reveal herself in a series of embarrassing gifts to civilization : cheap and unsafe family-aeroplanes, synthetic food at a nominal cost, an effective death-ray, a perfectly simple fool-proof contraceptive that is at the same time an effective œstruific, a new humanitarian religion based on the left-handed Sakta cult, an undetectible poison (of which she alone has the antidote) with an unrestricted sale at all grocer's shops, and an infallible system of prognosticating the winners of horse- and dog-races. After that she will proclaim herself Dictator and take the whole control of the State, which because of the Death Ray will also be the World State, and ride in a coach and six, and swim the Atlantic and Pacific oceans on a tour of her provinces, and marry M. Judy, the French President,

in St Peter's at Rome and compel him to take her name and become Mr Fisher (after which she will sacramentally eat him).

In the concluding years of Mrs Fisher's reign there will be no half-and-half jokes made anywhere. When the comedian slips on the banana-skin and falls downstairs he will invariably break his neck; in the stage-duel the combatants will neatly run each other through simultaneously; the prima ballerina, instead of throwing souvenir dolls among the audience will throw little bombs of poison-gas; the curtain will not be dropped on the crisis of the bedroom farce. There will be a strict control of the publishing trade: no fiction will be permitted unless plainly libellous and no historical treatise unless containing a reasonable proportion of mischievous and entirely plausible mis-statements. [I

recently anticipated Mrs Fisher in an essay on Rudyard Kipling in which, meaning to write *Recessional*, I unintentionally and exquisitely condemned him as the author of *Land of Hope and Glory*. Since then I have read his new *Book of Words* and wish that I had credited him with the *Eton Boating Song* too.] Finally Mrs Fisher will experiment in organic chemistry and re-people the world with dragons, gorgons, sabre-toothed tigers, and the earlier varieties of man. She will make all single flowers double and standardize the rose as thornless, scentless, blue, and perpetually flowering. She will condemn all existing sewage-schemes and replace them with others of her own having a marked tendency to retro-activity. She will control the world weather in a whimsical manner and insist that everyone of fifty years of age and over, or, alternatively,

with an income exceeding three hundred pounds a year, shall run about naked. She will institute compulsory opera with community singing of the tenor parts. Her standardized designs for lampshades, tea-services, cruets, cretonnes, and sofas will make the present goddawful look goddlovely by contrast. In her edicts and dispensation of justice she will make the Emperor Claudius Cæsar himself, who alone of the ancients seems to have had a futuristic sense of humour, look a mere Joe Miller. She will exterminate the so-called Latin races and hand over their lands, industries and languages to the British unemployed. She will insist on the continued use of the phrase "The progress of Civilization". When her invention flags and she sees the whole perfectly utterly goddawful raving world prostrate and paralysed before her, she will quite simply

commit suicide by putting her head in a gas-oven.

Perhaps the Mrs Fisher millennium is not so hopelessly distant. She has at any rate an Elijah in James Joyce from whose *Work in Progress* I quote part of the Ant and Grasshopper fable :

Behailed the Ondt with unshrinkables draping from his unthinkables, swarming of himself in his sunnyroom, sated before his comfortumble phullupsuppy of a plate o' monkynous and a confucion of minthe (for he was a conformed aristotaller) as appi as a oneysucker or a baskerboy on the Libido with Floh biting his big thigh and Luse lugging his left leg and Bienie bussing him under his bonnet and Vespatilla blowing cosy fond tutties up the large of his smalls. Emmet and demmet and be jiltses crazed and be jadeses whipt ! schneezed the Gracehoper at his wittol's end what have eyeforsight.

The Ondt was making the greatest spass a body could for he was spizzing all over him in formicolation, boundlessly bliss-filled in an allallahbath of houris. He was ameising himself hugely, chasing Floh out of charity and tickling Luse, I hope too, and tackling Bienie, faith as well, and catching Vespatilla by the end. Never did Dorcan from Dunshangan dance it with more devilry! The veripatetic figure of the Gracehoper on his odderkop in the myre, actually and presumptuably sinctifying chronic's despair, was sufficiently too much for his chorous of gravitates.

He larved and he larved and he merd such a naus
That the Gracehoper feared he would misplace his jaws.

I began by saying that the gap cannot be filled. On reconsideration, I add,

"Except by Mrs Fisher." And close with a remark of R's, whom I once seriously asked: "How could one write a legend about an angel and a cuckoo?" —and who answered seriously: "One would have to build it up from the cuckoo."

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